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# Brazil's Roman Catholic Church: The Political Implications of Increasing Activism

An Intelligence Assessment

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# Brazil's Roman Catholic Church: The Political Implications of Increasing Activism (U)

## An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 27 March 1981  
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## **Brazil's Roman Catholic Church: The Political Implications of Increasing Activism (U)**

### **Key Judgments**

Relations between the Brazilian Government and the Catholic Church, Brazil's most influential nongovernmental institution, have plunged to their lowest point since the early 1970s. Although the government has sought to maintain a dialogue with church leaders, the great disparity between the goals and methods of the two sides indicates that serious disputes are likely in the future.

The church is not monolithic; but its elements tend to agree on the need for a fundamental reorientation of national priorities. The once dominant conservative sector, which saw no temporal role for the church, has given way to a moderate majority that champions human rights and social and economic change. Moreover, there is an increasingly strident progressive vanguard that is willing to confront the government to achieve its ends.

Recent milestones in the deterioration in church-state relations include:

- The Sao Paulo metalworkers' strike last spring, in which the church was actively involved.
- Pope John Paul II's unprecedented—and controversial—visit last July, which the progressives interpreted as supporting their position.

Another source of tension is the so-called Foreigners Law, which increases the government's power to expel non-Brazilians—who make up approximately half the country's priests and almost one-fourth its bishops, including many of the more progressive. Also contributing are the church-sponsored ecclesiastical base communities—activist-oriented groups that priests organize mostly among the underprivileged. The communities are not intended to encourage political action, but the regime is apprehensive about their potential for influencing electoral politics and radicalizing the poor.

The church is also:

- Supporting labor's efforts toward political organization.
- Increasingly criticizing the business sector, especially in regard to land reform and what is termed "savage capitalism" by Sao Paulo's activist Cardinal Arns.
- Trying to develop greater cooperation with students, a presently quiescent sector, because of past associations and some coincidence of views.

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The church's evolving perception of its place in society will largely determine whether it is a force for instability or moderation. Since the church will continue to monitor the government's performance and regard itself as the "moral arbiter" of developments, this perception will be shaped largely by Brasilia's actions. In view of the incompatibility of the roles the church and government envision for themselves, continuing conflict is almost certain:

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### **Brazil's Roman Catholic Church: The Political Implications of Increasing Activism (U)**

The Catholic Church is Brazil's most influential non-governmental institution and the leading advocate of social and economic change and human rights. For more than a decade it has been the only broadly based and organized entity to question Brazil's military-backed governments. As the principal spiritual symbol of the world's largest Catholic nation—with 330 bishops and 100 million nominal followers—it enjoys enormous prestige and moral authority.

The church can act as a force for instability or moderation. Its activism—for example, supporting striking workers—is a force for instability because it generates stresses on Brazil's already severely strained society at a time when the government is opening up the political system and coping with stubborn economic problems. The church's support for the underprivileged and its exhortations to the regime to correct social and economic injustices—endorsed by Pope John Paul II during his summer visit—underscore its determination.

The church's activism, on the other hand, could contribute to orderly and steady reform rather than chaotic change. The church may represent the only mediating force of national stature capable of promoting moderation among disparate and competing elements of society—a role that could facilitate liberalization. Although the church wants to retain its influence as other civilian groups gain in importance, it is not necessarily in competition with these sectors or unwilling to promote their continued emergence, as its cooperation with labor indicates.

The regime, mindful of the church's moral authority and its potential to increase or moderate popular discontent, has established a continuing dialogue. Brasilia is particularly concerned about the church's involvement in partisan politics and resents its assumption of the role of "moral arbiter." Whether the regime will address pressing and complex social and economic problems at a pace acceptable to the church while remaining committed to liberalization is a key question. Given Brasilia's near-term economic priorities and its strategy of allowing only gradual political,

social, and economic change, the likelihood of future disputes is high.

On balance, continuing friction between the church and the government probably will prove more counterproductive than beneficial to Brazilian society. Church-state relations already have plunged to their lowest point since the early 1970s. Although the church in some cases has pressed the regime in constructive directions, the methods of some of its members and the urgency that it imputes to its goals usually place the regime in an unfavorable light, challenge its authority, and even call into question its legitimacy. The trends in recent church-state relations strongly suggest that fundamental and orderly reform of Brazilian society will be adversely affected by the continued differences between the church and the government.

#### **The Church as an Institution**

Although Catholicism in Brazil has the usual church hierarchy, a "national church" does not exist; each bishop is largely responsible for the functioning of his own diocese. Consequently, church figures of national prominence sometimes take conflicting stands, and even priests frequently express individual positions.

The National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), created in 1952, is the most influential church body. It usually reflects the views of the progressive-moderate majority. The CNBB has been a key factor in reorienting the church toward a more activist role. Its endorsement of the most recent Latin American Bishops' Conference at Puebla in 1979, which espoused social action in behalf of the poor, underscores its outlook.

Significant differences occur between the pronouncements of the CNBB as an institution and the declarations—usually tactical—made by individual bishops. The CNBB holds periodic conferences and releases formal position papers—after a vote—explaining its stand on a variety of issues. In such instances the CNBB can be considered as speaking for the church.

But it is a relatively undisciplined body lacking centralized control, and debates among the clergy can be lively and sometimes confusing.

The existence of progressive, moderate, and conservative elements precludes adoption of a uniform stand on the question of a religious organization's role in society, but the clergy are basically united on the need for broad social and economic change. The important differences that divide them concern means rather than ends. Most churchmen view these internal differences as healthy, despite the regime's efforts to exploit them.

The *moderates*, the majority element and the most influential, believe the church must preserve peace and its own internal unity, but not at the cost of overlooking social and economic inequities. Their liberalism on social questions contrasts with their conservatism on issues relating to church discipline, organization, and doctrine. Although the moderates reject violence, they fear it is inevitable unless gradual change is accomplished.

The *progressives* are the most strident group. Deeply committed to improving the lot of the underprivileged, they believe the church must use its moral authority to press the government to that end. In favoring structural reform of Brazilian society, some progressives do not rule out a recourse to violence. Their broad and aggressive interpretation of the church's role and their attacks on the evils of Brazilian capitalism have infuriated the regime and conservative civilians, who accuse them of being Marxists.

The once dominant *conservatives* are no longer as influential. Their view that the church's only legitimate role is to guide the spiritual lives of the faithful is shared by the regime but no longer accepted by most churchmen. Especially in the late 1960s, the conservatives weakened their popular credibility by their tendency to regard demands for reform as Communist-inspired. Even more damaging was the public perception that they supported the military regime.

#### **The Deterioration of Church-State Relations**

Since 1964, Brazil's Catholic Church has gradually achieved leadership of an amorphous civilian movement that seeks to nurture democracy and social and

economic justice. Its leadership is not attributable to its national structure—matched only by the military—or even to the activism of its clergy. Rather, it has filled the vacuum created by the regime's limitations on other civilian groups.

Until the mid-1960s the church was basically a conservative and apolitical institution identified with the middle class and certain economic elites. Its activities were limited to spiritual affairs because few churchmen believed temporal matters were a legitimate interest of the church.

The church's increasing activism since the mid-1960s resulted from two factors. First, the church in Latin America as a whole—following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin (1968), and various liberal papal encyclicals—became dedicated to promoting social and economic justice. Second, differences between the church and the government became increasingly evident after the March 1964 military coup, and these intensified during the following decade. The church's vigorous defense of human rights and its calls for a return to democracy collided with the regime's antisubversive policies and restrictions on political activity. The church could not ignore the government's excesses and retain its moral authority among the faithful.

Church-state relations were smoother during the Geisel administration (1974-79), when both sides made a concerted effort to reduce tensions and establish a dialogue. Largely responsible for the change was the government's commitment to liberalization: it ended most press censorship—which had extended to the Sao Paulo archdiocese publication, *O Sao Paulo*—and softened some harsh laws.

The government of President Joao Figueiredo, inaugurated in March 1979, initially continued the trend toward more cordial relations with the church. Prior to his inauguration Figueiredo established contact with church figures, including the CNBB president, and he expanded this connection afterward. Key administration spokesmen, such as the Justice Minister, also held regular consultations with leading clergy.

Another factor favoring improved relations was Figueiredo's commitment to gradual liberalization. In less than a year he granted amnesty to political prisoners and exiles, revamped the party system to broaden political participation, and relaxed restrictions on student and union activity. Figueiredo's willingness to address chronic social and economic problems were well received by the church.

**The Sao Paulo Metalworkers' Strike.** Church-state relations began to deteriorate seriously last spring, however, primarily as a result of sharp differences over the involvement of the Sao Paulo archdiocese—Brazil's most progressive—in a six-week strike by the large metalworkers' unions. The local church's confrontational stance during the strike vividly demonstrated not only its willingness to pursue its goals regardless of the cost, but also the church's potential for creating serious problems for the government.

Led by Brazil's most progressive cardinal, Paulo Evaristo Arns, the church in Sao Paulo actively supported the metalworkers' demands for higher wages, more benefits, and greater political freedom. Its backing enabled the union to prolong the strike and eventually to gain wage settlements that adversely affected the government's efforts to control inflation.

The net result was to heighten military doubts about the wisdom of liberalization at a time of serious economic difficulties. After initial restraint, Brasilia reacted sharply. Influenced by hardline military elements, the government declared the strike illegal and imprisoned union leaders, charging that they were motivated by political, not economic considerations. President Figueiredo publicly accused Cardinal Arns of inciting the workers and asserted that he did not represent the church as a whole.

Although the strike was settled, the confrontation left an indelible mark. Figueiredo's censure of the Sao Paulo archdiocese not only failed to lessen its support for the workers, but also led to greater criticism of his government from other sectors. Moreover, most of the church nationwide rallied behind Cardinal Arns's forceful support of the workers. This included the CNBB leadership, which sharply criticized Brasilia's actions as well as its economic priorities.

**The Papal Visit.** The strike was followed by Pope John Paul II's unprecedented—and controversial—12-day visit last July. His unwavering support for the underprivileged overshadowed his disavowal of a political role for the church, his insistence of peaceful reform, and his repudiation of Marxist ideology.

Although John Paul did not unequivocally side with the activist clergy, they interpreted his public statements as supportive and were encouraged to press the government further on such issues as agrarian reform, income redistribution, and workers' rights.

Even the more conservative clergy may follow the Pontiff's lead and take more forceful stands in these areas. John Paul's effusive greeting of Archbishop Helder Camara of Recife and Olinda—Brazil's best known progressive—and his warm reception of Cardinal Arns were noted by the more conservative clergy.

The regime, for its part, was disappointed in its hope that the Pope would support its views and had only limited success in its attempt to gain popularity from his visit. By spotlighting the poverty that afflicts the country despite more than a decade of high growth, the Pope led many to believe he was repudiating the development model so highly touted by the regime—and so roundly criticized by church progressives and moderates. Brazil's leaders were especially discomfited by the Pope's exhortations to correct glaring inequalities. Moreover, the immense crowds the Pope attracted, which no public or private Brazilian figure could hope to match, underlined the lack of charismatic leadership in the government.

#### **New Strains in the Relationship**

In the aftermath of the Papal visit, relations between the church and the Figueiredo administration have deteriorated to their lowest point. A still latent but looming issue is how the regime will respond to the church's increasing political role, primarily through its local activist groups called "ecclesiastical base communities." But the greatest new strains were created by a controversial immigration law enacted last August.



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*Pope John Paul's effusive greeting of Dom Helder Camara (U)*



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**The Foreigners Law.** The church opposes the so-called "Foreigners Law" because it gives the executive arbitrary powers to expel foreigners, including priests. About half of the country's almost 14,000 priests are not Brazilians, including almost one-fourth of its bishops. These foreign churchmen are among the most radical within the church, and they also make up a significant percentage of the moderates. Moreover, the foreign priests' easy access to international opinion-makers, especially in the United States and Western Europe, often has resulted in the regime being viewed unfavorably by human rights groups and church organizations of all denominations.

The fears of many religious figures that the regime would use the statute to intimidate foreign priests in Brazil were borne out last October when an Italian priest was expelled for making "political" statements. The move provoked a number of sharp exchanges between the church and the government, including charges by one hardline army general that a progressive Brazilian bishop was a Marxist and that more priests should be expelled. The general's remarks became so controversial that the Justice Minister had to disavow them.

The priest's expulsion also led to an incident involving Cardinal Eugenio Sales, a leading moderate who heads the Rio de Janeiro archdiocese. The Cardinal, who in

the past has prided himself on his good relations with the military, not only canceled his scheduled acceptance of an army medal, but made a point of accompanying the priest to the airport.

As a result of harsh criticism levied by the church and other civilian groups, the government has expressed its willingness to modify the Foreigners Law. Although the church is skeptical, Brasilia appears ready to accept changes during the current legislative session. Whether the government will accommodate the church's views is unclear.

**The Base Communities.** The key factor in the evolving church-state dispute is the church-sponsored ecclesiastical base communities, which have become the principal instrument of its activist social policy. Generally organized among the most underprivileged classes, the communities include labor groups, students, farm workers, and even jailed criminals. There are already close to 100,000 of these groups throughout Brazil, with almost 2 million members.

The communities not only provide forums for discussion, but also encourage the poor to resolve their problems by applying pressure on local authorities. Although supporters deny they are intended to encourage political action, many communities are highly politicized. They frequently support candidates who pledge

solutions for their problems and presumably will put forward their own candidates for local elections.

The communities appear to be slowly replacing the traditional parish structure, although this is not an intended or even desired development. Nevertheless, Brazil's clergy overwhelmingly support them, regarding the communities as a positive force for social change and one of the few alternatives to Communism. But even fervent supporters—such as Dom Helder Camara, once the regime's bete noire—are concerned that the communities could gradually lose their religious character. Presumably, this would make them susceptible to Communist penetration or to manipulation by politicians.

An important church moderate, Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider of Fortaleza, last December became the first churchman of national stature to imply that the base communities could be used to influence electoral politics. He warned that if the regime failed to revise its policies to benefit the poor, it would face defeat at the polls—a reference to the planned balloting in 1982 when state governors, national legislators, and local officials are to be popularly elected.

Whatever the church's intentions with regard to the communities, they represent a potential political reservoir. Especially in a climate of continued liberalization, the apparently growing influence of the communities could be directed toward certain parties or mobilized in support of a particular issue.

Alarmed at the political implications of such a development, the government will react sharply if the church systematically pursues this strategy. Conservative civilians and hardline military men are already charging that the church is fomenting class struggle by radicalizing the poor. In particular, the regime will be concerned if the base communities seem to be eroding the traditional rural support it is counting on in the 1982 elections.

#### **The Church and Society**

The church's secular activities have increased dramatically. This has brought it into contact—and occasional confrontation—with a wide range of influential sectors, primarily labor, business, and students.

**Labor.** The church has been most visible—and most political—in its support for Brazil's fledgling labor movement. Although the Sao Paulo archdiocese has been the most active in this area, the church in general is sympathetic to labor's grievances and to its modest efforts to prod the regime to reform outdated labor legislation. The church, moreover, is considered an important ally by diverse labor groups, which have welcomed its backing and sought to use its support to strengthen their position.

The church's increased identification with labor stems in large part from a coincidence of views in the economic area. The church, for example, long has supported labor's contention that Brazil's "economic miracle" was a product of disproportionate worker sacrifice. It consequently has backed union demands for wage increases that in some cases have been far in excess of levels that businessmen and the regime consider appropriate. This support has collided with Planning Minister Delfim Netto's efforts to stem inflation, which exceeded 100 percent in 1980.

The church also champions increased labor participation in the political process. The Sao Paulo archdiocese, for example, has established a working relationship with Brazil's most prominent labor leader, Luis Inacio da Silva (Lula), whose efforts to organize a workers' political party were dealt a setback recently when a military court convicted him of inciting strikes. Even though the Pope has ordered the church to avoid a political role, priests in Sao Paulo reportedly have urged members of their base communities to support Lula and his party. The Sao Paulo archdiocese also has collected and managed strike funds and permitted unions to use religious facilities.

The regime is greatly annoyed because activist clergymen—not only in Sao Paulo, but also in rural areas such as the sugar-growing northeast—are helping to politicize and organize workers. The military originally assumed power because it feared the growing strength of the labor movement—a concern compounded by what was perceived as labor's susceptibility to Communist and radical influences, its ability to paralyze certain sectors of the economy, and its manipulation by politicians.

A visceral dislike for mixing politics, religion, and labor is spurring Brasilia to such reactions as the prosecution of Lula. Despite these efforts at intimidation, two other nascent parties are striving to cultivate worker support and, if successful, could further politicize various unions. In any case, the regime can expect a continuation of cooperation between the church, labor, and some workers' party—the Sao Paulo archdiocese may be deemphasizing its specific support of Lula's party—as well as strong pressures from these sectors on its economic policies.

**Business.** The church has generally held private enterprise at arm's length, but recently has increased its attacks on conservative business interests, particularly those tied to agriculture. The church has been persistently critical of multinational corporations and of Brazil's development model—"savage capitalism" in the words of Cardinal Arns. Given the church's economic philosophy—especially its rejection of capitalist development and its insistence on far-reaching land reform—future confrontations are almost certain.

The church believes the land problem—in its social, economic, and political manifestations—has reached crisis proportions. Warning of increased violence, it blames the government and the "expansion of agroindustrial enterprises" for what it terms "institutionalized injustice." The National Conference of Brazilian Bishops first spoke out on this issue in February 1980 in a major document, "The Church and Land Problems." Although the issue had previously been addressed by individual priests and bishops, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops document achieved a remarkable degree of unity, with all but two of the 250 bishops in attendance approving the text.

The document argues that Brazil's land system has concentrated power and wealth in the hands of a few while producing social dislocation in rural areas and poverty in the cities. It accuses the large landowners of benefiting from government policies, creating a chronic influx of rural migrants to urban centers, spawning rural violence, and exploiting Brazil's Indian population.

Pledging to denounce future injustice, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops committed itself to:

- Support the "just initiatives" of workers' organizations, both rural and urban.
- Defend the efforts of the rural population to realize "true" agrarian reform.
- Promote the "legitimate" interests of Brazil's indigenous population.
- Condemn the "shameful effects" of capitalism.

The business sector's strategy in disputes with the church has been to appeal to those in government who share its concerns. The presidents of 11 agricultural producers' associations, for example, complained bitterly to the Planning Minister about the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops document. They accused the church of seeking to convert the country to Communism, a view shared by some local officials and military men. These efforts, however, reinforce the church's contention that complicity between business and the government impoverishes the workers and enriches the multinationals. The sharp differences separating church and business make further clashes likely.

**Students.** The church is least active in its relations with students, although it is interested in preventing the emergence of Marxist-oriented student organizations and in reducing the possibility of students being driven to underground activities and violence. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many progressive clergy joined with radical students to challenge the regime, but this was not an officially sanctioned activity. Despite its extensive network of schools and universities, the church's potential for influence is limited by the absence of mobilizing organizations and by the students' generally apolitical stance. Nevertheless, a coincidence of church and student views in certain areas, as well as their past association, suggest that greater cooperation is possible.

#### **Outlook**

The church probably would not have emerged as the preeminent force for social change in Brazil if the regime had not dismantled civilian institutions and depoliticized major organizations such as political parties, unions, and universities. Given President Figueiredo's commitment to liberalization, it is not entirely certain that the church will play an equally vocal and activist role in the future. This depends on a

number of factors—including the church's perception of its role. The odds, however, favor continued and perhaps increased reformist activity—and thus continued conflict with the government.

Church activism is clearly on the rise. The progressive-moderate majority, although disagreeing over tactics, is unified on a broad range of issues. Even the conservative clergy view social activism on behalf of the underprivileged as necessary.

The continuation of liberalization would further increase the political participation and influence of formerly neglected groups—as has already begun to happen—and also could help to defuse latent tensions. Under such circumstances, many clergymen might believe the church should gradually return to a purely spiritual role.

The church will remain the country's most influential nongovernmental institution for the foreseeable future. It will continue to monitor the government's management of liberalization, and it will speak out forcefully if the regime wavers or backtracks. Should liberalization lead to a return of civilian rule, the church would challenge that government with equal vigor if it failed to carry out social and economic reforms. In either case, given the incompatibility of the roles the church and the regime envision for themselves, continuing conflict is almost certain.

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